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National Hispanic Heritage Month

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On September 15, schools began organizing essay contests with Hispanic themes, websites began publishing lists of Hispanic heritage events, and museums began hosting Hispanic-themed exhibitions, films, and programs. Hispanic Heritage Month had begun.

Despite the fact that the United States' Hispanic heritage reaches five centuries into the past, it was not until 30 years ago that the nation officially honored that heritage, and it wasn't until 1989 that the recognition evolved into a month-long celebration.

The request to celebrate Hispanic heritage on a national scale was first made by the Senate and the House of Representatives. Those bodies assembled in Congress on September 17, 1968, to authorize an annual proclamation making the week of September 15 and 16 Hispanic Heritage Week. In this same resolution, the Senate and the House of Representatives requested that the American people observe this celebration by organizing activities in accordance with the spirit of the week.

The designated week was selected because Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua celebrate Independence Day on September 15, and Mexico celebrates Independence Day on September 16.

However, it was soon clear that because the designated week fell at the beginning of the school year, educators were too occupied with the resuming school session to enthusiastically celebrate Hispanic heritage.


To encourage more participation from the educational community and the U.S. community as a whole, President Gerald R. Ford issued a call in 1977 to all schools and human rights organizations to more actively observe Hispanic Heritage Week. "When the Pilgrim Fathers landed at Plymouth Rock, Hispanic civilization was already flourishing in what is now Florida and New Mexico," Ford noted. "Since then, the Hispanic contribution to America has been a consistent and vital influence in our country's cultural growth."

Echoing Ford's earlier proclamation, and calling it an "honor well deserved," President Ronald Reagan further expanded the celebration in 1988 by authorizing a congressional request that National Hispanic Heritage Week be

turned into Hispanic Heritage Month.

Latinos' impact and influence on the United States is, as former President George Bush once said, "a living legacy" that has profoundly impacted the history and development of the United States. As the president noted, "the values passed from generation to generation in Hispanic American families are values central to the American experience."

National Hispanic Heritage Month now officially lasts from September 15 to October 15, including October 12, known as Columbus Day in the U.S. and as *El Día de la Raza* in Latin American countries.



HISPANIC THREADS IN AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

The contributions of Hispanics to the development and success of America are woven into almost every segment of the nation's history. To envision America untouched by Latinos is to imagine a country without much of its folklore and many of its achievements.

Hispanic Heritage Month celebrates the Latino contribution. It also lets us recognize that America's cultural diversity--and the contributions of all its citizens--have made America's fabric strong throughout its history.

The United States has a rich history that goes back 218 years. Hispanics have always played major roles in building this country and making it a better place.

From the Revolutionary War that freed the United States from England to the Persian Gulf War, Latinos have proudly served this country in the Armed Forces. And throughout U.S. history, Latinos have prominently participated in building the West; in medicine and science; in entertainment, business, education, civil rights, and politics; and in the great American pastime of baseball.

BEGINNING WITH REVOLUTIONARY ROOTS

When the colonies on the East Coast of what became the United States rebelled against England, Hispanics played a pivotal role. As Governor of the Louisiana Territory, General Bernardo de Gálvez sent money, rifles, and other supplies to General George Washington. Latinos also raised special collections to aid the fight for independence.

Captain Jorge Farragut came to the U.S. from the Spanish Island of Minorca to fight against the British. Captain Farragut fought in the Revolution, then in the War of 1812, as part of the U.S. Navy.

CREATING U.S. TECHNOLOGY

As the new nation expanded across the continent, pioneers sought both homes and wealth. The West seemed rich in metals and ores, but the settlers knew little about how to mine them. When gold and other valuable metals were discovered in California and other states, many prospectors knew only what they had. They had no idea of how to get it out of the ground. To do so, they borrowed mining techniques from Mexico, Peru, and Chile.

In a popular California mining legend, James Marshall, upon discovering gold, supposedly proclaimed the news yelling, "Gold! Gold!" What he really said was "*Chispa*," Spanish for "bright speck."

BUILDING THE WESTERN U.S.

The end of the Civil War marked the start of a mass migration of people into the Western territories. While settling the frontier, people realized that the farmland differed from the land in the East. Irrigation and water supply became far more important to frontier settlers than they had been back East.

Managing the water supply was an art the settlers learned from the Mexicans, who learned it from the Pueblo Indians.

Early songs and legends of the Old West featured an Americanized version of the "*vaqueros*" (cowboys) from México. Thus, the enduring legend of the cowboy of the Old West came almost entirely from the Hispanic culture.

The music, folklore, art, and architecture of Latinos were widely adopted in this country. The architecture is particularly well suited to the climate and land in the Southwest. And mural art from the early Southwest still inspires contemporary artists.

DEFENDING THE NATION

As they did in the Revolutionary War, Hispanics have served proudly in each war and conflict entered by this nation. In the course of service, 38 Latinos have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest honor conferred for military bravery.

In the Civil War, David Glasgow Farragut, son of Jorge Farragut, won fame as a Union hero by blocking Southern ports. His contributions prompted Congress to create the title of Rear Admiral to reward him for his valor.

Federico Fernández Cavada, a Lieutenant Colonel for the Union, fought bravely at Gettysburg, Rafael Chacón also served with the Union and earned the rank of Major. Santos Benavidez fought for the Confederacy. His rank of Colonel was the highest of any Mexican-American army officer in the Civil War.

More than 400,000 Hispanics served the U.S. during World War II. About 25,000 served in the Persian Gulf War.

ENRICHING MEDICINE AND SCIENCE

Latinos have contributed much to the fields of medicine and science. In New York in 1959, Dr. Severo Ochoa won the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology for his discovery of RNA (ribonucleic acid), one of the chemical building blocks of life. In 1986, Costa Rican born Dr. Franklin Chang-Díaz, the first Hispanic astronaut roared into space. He was followed by astronaut Sydney Gutiérrez. In 1993, Dr. Ellen Ochoa became the first Latina in space.

ENTERTAINING THE COUNTRY

At the birth of the movie industry, Hispanic actresses like Myrtle González and Beatriz Michelena were some of the most popular draws in silent films. Hispanic stars in the 1920s and 1930s included Dolores del Río, Lupe Vélez, and Ramón Novarro. The decades of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s headlined stars like Rita Hayworth, Fernando Lamas, Anthony Quinn, and Rita Moreno (the only artist to win all four major industry awards: the Oscar, Emmy, Tony, and Grammy).

In the 1950s, Desi Arnaz, the famed Cuban band leader, embarked on an adventure of creating his own television production studio. He introduced the "three camera" technique (now the staple of the industry) for shooting a TV situation comedy. Arnaz was also the first to use film to preserve TV shows for re-runs. The *I Love Lucy* series he produced remains one of the most loved and watched series of all time.

Today, Latino stars include Martin Sheen (and his sons Charlie Sheen and Emilio Estévez), Andy García, Raúl Julia, Edward James Olmos, Rosie Pérez, and Jimmy Smits.

ACHIEVEMENT IN SPORTS

Latinos have long contributed to sports in this nation. In 1871 Esteban Bellan was the first Latino to play major league baseball. Roberto Clemente, one of baseball's greatest legends, is remembered as much for his humanitarian efforts as he is for his athletic ability. Great Latino names in professional golf include Lee Treviño, Chi Chi Rodríguez and Nancy López. Tom Flores is well respected as a professional football coach. There are now many Latinas on the professional tennis circuit.

BECOMING LEADERS

The first Latino to serve in Congress, Joseph Marion Hernández, was elected in 1822 as a Delegate to the U.S. Congress from Florida. Octaviano A. Larrazolo, who served in 1928, was the first Hispanic U.S. Senator. There are 13.7 million eligible Hispanic voters and 5,170 Hispanic elected officials (1,554 women), including 156 state legislators and 20 members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Two members of President Bill Clinton's Cabinet at the level of Secretary are Hispanic.

Outside of the political arena, César Chávez (1927-1993), founder of the United Farm Workers Union, led the fight to gain recognition for the workers who harvest this nation's produce. Under his leadership, farm workers successfully negotiated labor contracts with growers for the first time, César Chavez received the Presidential Freedom Award posthumously from President Bill Clinton in 1994.

Latino contributions to the growth and development of the United States have been many. As this nation looks forward to the 21st century, Latinos will continue to play a major role in meeting the challenges ahead.

HISPANIC THREADS IN AMERICA was written by Cecilia M. García, Director of Communications for the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, Inc. The Institute is a nonpartisan educational organization dedicated to leadership development for Hispanic youth. Juan Gómez-Quíñones, Professor of History at the University of California Los Angeles provided research. Hispanic Threads in America was produced for HBO by KIDSNET, the computerized clearinghouse for children's television and radio.

HBO gratefully acknowledges the early creative support of the National Council of La Raza in the development of this brochure.

SOURCES

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OBJECTIVES

- * to create a greater awareness of Latino contributions to American culture;
- * to illustrate the diversity of the Latino community;
- * to encourage a greater curiosity within students about the rich history and culture of Hispanics.

TARGETED AGES: Seventh through twelfth grades.

CURRICULUM AREAS: American History, Civics, Social Studies, Political Science.

HBO uses the terms Latino/Latina and Hispanic interchangeably to reflect the preferences of people throughout the United States.

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